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AUTHOR Farrell, Edmund J.
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ABSTRACT

To avoid "burn out" from the general tensions of the times and from the severe demands of the teaching profession, English teachers need to exploit the means of renewal. Having literature at their command, English teachers can reconstruct themselves again and again through the dynamic interplay of human imagination and language artistically wrought. In addition to literature, teachers are blessed in having composition as a major component of the curriculum. Clearly the writing process is a ritual of renewal, of transmuting inchoate and often chaotic thoughts and feelings into an external order that simultaneously reorganizes the inner self. Too, the profession of teaching has built into it cycles of renewal, from planning periods to summer vacations. Beyond finding renewal within the school calendar, teachers can find renewal in the young people who enter the classroom, being renewed by their vitality and often by their idealism and innocence. Another means of renewal, one outside the classroom, is that furnished by colleagues at conferences. At conferences teachers can learn from and be reassured by others. Outside the pale of the profession, teachers must find their own idiosyncratic means of renewal--whether it be through jogging, buying a new outfit, or collecting antiques. By consciously seeking renewal, teachers can find some joy in the world, some hope for the future, and some reason for persevering. (HOD)

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The Cycle of Renewal

Edmund J. Farrell

The University of Texas at Austin

We live in a perilous time, one in which national chauvinism, inept diplomacy, or military blunders could precipitate a holocaust spelling the end of the human species and, with it, both nature's 4.5 million year investment in us and our eons-long participation in its cycles. Only thirty-eight years after Hiroshima, the United States and the Soviet Union possess between them 40,000 nuclear warheads, most--by a factor of at least fifteen--far more powerful than the bomb that leveled that Japanese city, killing more than 75,000 and injuring nearly 100,000. The U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency estimates that a single one-megaton airburst over the New York City metropolitan area would kill 1,667,000 people and profoundly injure 2,838,000, while a single 20-megaton air burst would kill 7,698,000 and seriously injure 3,874,000, figures regarded by some experts as being far too conservative. Further, in the event of all-out war, thousands of nuclear megatons would shower all major cities in the United States, Europe, and Russia, not only killing tens of millions instantly and injuring scores of millions more but, because of the spread of pestilence and

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and radiation, making the globe uninhabitable.

About the possibility of annihilating life, Jonathan Schell writes in *The Fate of the Earth* (Avon Books, 1982):

> Death, having been augmented by human strength, has lost its appointed place in the natural order and has become a counter-revolutionary force, capable of destroying in a few years, or even in a few hours, what evolution has built up over billions of years. In doing so, death threatens even itself, since death, after all, is part of life....The question now before the human species, therefore, is whether life or death will prevail on earth. This is not metaphorical language but a literal description of the present state of affairs (p. 113).

I lack the intelligence, the foresight, the hubris to tell you what you should do to help avert nuclear warfare. In the last year, 250 books have been published on the subject of nuclear arms, and support to end the arms race has been marshalled by such diverse groups as the Nuclear Freeze Campaign, Ground Zero, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Council for a Liveable World, Union of Concerned Scientists, Federation of American Scientists, Common Cause, and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Even Robinson Jeffers failed to anticipate the severity of the crisis, the possibility that practical people, which I interpret to mean all of us, will no longer exist after nations next "labor and gather and dissolve/Into destruction."

As you well know, we have our own means of burning out without awaiting "the fire next time," of suffocating our spiritual flame under the burden of too many classes, too

many students, too many preparations, too many papers to grade, too little time in which to do what we feel needs to be done, and, all too frequently, too unsympathetic an administration assessing our efforts. The general tensions of the times, coupled to the severe demands of our profession, are sufficient to exhaust us all, to cause us prematurely to "rust out of service." To keep kindled that inner flame that enables us--despite responsibilities and concerns that oft seem intolerable--to find some joy in the world, some hope for the future, some reason for persevering, we need consciously to exploit the means of our renewal. Fortunately, those means seem as innumerable, as inexhaustible, as the forces that oppress us.

Like other humans, we are observers of the cycles of the seasons. Unlike most, however, we not only intuit but, because of our knowledge of literature, are consciously aware of the four seasons' symbolic ties to human life, with its analogical pattern of birth, maturity, old age, and death. Because literature is at our command, we need not await the physical arrival of spring to reinvest ourselves in that most sanguine of seasons: myriads of poems await our call. Cummings' "in Just" can transport us in a twinkling from December to May, just as Hopkins' "Spring and Fall" can do the reverse, reminding those of us in our budding season that death will eventually claim its due. To re-enjoy the

munificence of fall, we need not consult the calendar: Keats "To Autumn" is twelve-months at the ready.

As Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Cary Nelson, and other critics remind us, literature has the power to transform us, not merely to renew us as we were, but to assist us in becoming that which we have not been and aspire to be. Persons more practical than we, those who belittle the importance of literature to the curriculum, regarding it as a frill and insisting on the primacy of "functional" reading, are nay-sayers to life: they deny the capacity of individuals to reconstruct themselves again and again through the dynamic interplay of human imagination and language artistically wrought.

In addition to having literature as our province, we are blessed in having composition as a major component of the curriculum. Rhetoricians as diverse as James Moffett and Josephine Miles have made clear that through writing, we compose ourselves. The process is one whereby we attempt by means of language to reconcile conflicting ideas and emotions and, through that reconciliation, to gain composure, to become psychically whole once again. Clearly, the writing process is a ritual of renewal, of transmuting inchoate and often chaotic thoughts and feelings into an external order that simultaneously reorganizes the inner-self, making of it something other than it had been. Unlike the act of

speaking, in which we often startle ourselves by the spontaneity of what we have to say ("My God! Do I really think that??), the act of composing enables us to arrest our language. We can delete, add to, and reorder our words, honing them until they represent the us we wish to present to the world. We need to help our students both to understand the importance of composing as a linguistic means of renewal and to command the complex skills it requires. And for our own peace of mind, we must ourselves compose.

To appreciate the importance of language as an integrator of human personality, as a medium for renewal, one need only recall the chapter in Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* in which Helen describes associating for the first time the physical substance of water with the signs being formed in her hand by her teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy. That association liberated Helen, permitted her in time to express her manifold talents, enabled her to join the ranks of the human community. An even more dramatic depiction of the humanizing power of language can be found in *The Story of Christy Brown* (Pocket Book, 1971), in which Christy describes how writing freed his spirit from the spastic body it inhabited. One of seventeen living children born into a poor Irish family, Christy had such a severe case of cerebral palsy that he was unable to speak and could command no muscles except those in his left foot. In his autobiography,

he describes being propped up with pillows against a kitchen wall, watching, at age five, his sister Mona and his brother Paddy writing down sums on an old chipped slate. Wanting desperately to do what his sister was doing, Christy impulsively reached out and seized with his left foot the piece of yellow chalk from Mona's hand. He then commenced to scribble with it on the slate. With his mother's help and encouragement, he eventually made the letter A, a process that in time enabled him to communicate through print and that led to his writing several novels and an autobiography.

About the experience and the significance of having drawn on a bleak December day the single letter A, Christy wrote as follows:

> I drew it--*the letter "A"*. There it was on the floor before me. Shaky, with awkward, wobbly sides and a very uneven center line. But it *was* the letter "A." I looked up. I saw my mother's face for a moment, tears on her cheeks. Then my father stooped and hoisted me on to his shoulder.
>
> I had done it! It had started--the thing that was to give my mind its chance of expressing itself. True, I couldn't speak with my lips. But now I would speak through something more lasting than spoken words--written words.
>
> That one letter, scrawled on the floor with a broken bit of yellow chalk gripped between my toes, was my road to a new world, my key to mental freedom. It was to provide a source of relaxation to the tense, taut thing that was I, which panted for expression behind a twisted mouth (p. 17).

Aside from the subject we profess, a cornucopia for renewing both our students and ourselves, the profession of teaching fortunately has built into it cycles for renewal,

from planning periods to summer vacations. I can recall more than one day when, physically and emotionally enervated, I have slumped in a faculty lounge with a catatonic glaze across my eyes throughout the better part of a planning period, renewed in time by coffee and silence. I have been renewed by the ringing of a dismissal bell, punctuating the end of a school day. Exhausted from evaluating papers deep into evening, I have been renewed by the sound sleep of a night. I have been renewed following an accumulation of wearisome days, by the banal arrival of a Friday. And, like you, having suffered following Christmas vacation that period between the New Year and spring recess, a stretch of days that can be likened in their interminability to sands upon the Sahara, I have been renewed by the arrival of that seasonal hiatus from the chores of teaching. The annual respite provided in March or April makes bearable the final run of days down to June.

There are those who would disrupt our cycle of renewal, the pattern by which we count time, the way by which we divide the school day and school year. Unappreciative of how exhausting--how emotionally, intellectually, and even physically debilitating--teaching is, foolishly they argue for lengthened teaching days, shortened vacations, and twelve months of schooling. The most practical of practical people, they want efficiency from an art, and cannot understand why

so many good teachers, despite their so-called bankers' hours and lengthy vacations, depart the classroom, protesting its inordinate demands. Take away summer vacations, during which time morale reaches its zenith, and a phalanx of English teachers will instantly, and rightfully, desert the profession.

Beyond finding renewal within the school calendar, we are annually renewed by the young people who enter our classes, renewed always by their vitality and often by their idealism and innocence. We may age, but we are kept forever young by the effervescence of those in our charge, an effervescence that, paradoxically, can buoy us up while wearing us down. In being able to participate repeatedly in the lives of the young, we are more fortunate than parents. While they have one or two, we have many; while theirs depart in time, leaving a vacuum behind, ours are replenished. And while we teach, we are being taught, occasionally by ourselves, more often by those before us. Who, in the act of explaining a problem to a student, has not had the experience of understanding for the first time the problem himself? Who has not been renewed by the unanticipated insight of a student, an insight that undercut hoary dogma, forcing us to view freshly what certitude had begun to wilt? Finally, who has not found renewal through the benison of shared laughter, that most unprogrammable of classroom activities.

To this day, I recall with amusement a quip made by a student in 1957, a quarter-century ago. Firm about decorum, I had demanded that the seniors whom I taught at James Lick High School remain in their seats until I excused them at period's end. Though I pointed out that I would not bolt if they were speaking to me when the bell rang and that I therefore did not expect them to bolt if I or another student were speaking, my logic failed to persuade. They repeatedly protested that I was the only teacher who inflicted upon them this insane rule, that I was treating them as though they were infants when it was transparent that they were mature human beings, able to own automobiles, capable of being parents, ready to serve their nation, and so on.

Came the day in May when I was directed by the administration to read aloud in each class the procedures to follow in the event of a hydrogen bomb attack. Though I regarded the directive as frivolous, I treated it with desired seriousness. But the students did not. As I intoned the procedures, seriatim, in 3rd period, the noise steadily mounted. Finally, unable to tolerate the din any longer, I stopped, froze, waited for silence, and then, in my most stentorian voice, asserted, "Be quiet, or we may all be blown to hell." Immediately a hand shot up, that of Tony Buoncore, a swarthy cross between a young Tony Curtis and a ripe Joe Namath. I said, "Yes, Tony," a courteous invitation to the

carefully articulated, memorably funny response, "Care if we go without your permission?"

A means of renewal, one outside the classroom, is that furnished by colleagues at conferences such as this. By and large, we teachers of English bore other humans, for we are forever talking shop, forever trying to gauge how we are doing. Ours is a lonely profession, one that contains more content than any of us can master, more incertitude about how to evaluate students' progress than is true for mathematics or science. So we congregate to learn from each other, to be reassured by each other. Like pilgrims in search of spiritual renewal, we journey in cyclical fashion to annual conventions of NCTE, CCCC, CEE, CATE, knowing that words, our own and those of others, can recharge and restore us. And certainly in a conference as large as this, as rich in offerings as this, we are going to find the linguistic grail we seek.

Outside the pale of the profession and within the cycle of the seasons, we must find idiosyncratic means of renewal. Though we share the common experiences of birth, aging, and death, we each must place our own stamp on life, giving vent to tastes in a manner peculiarly our own. Among us, I am sure, can be found individuals who find renewal through jogging, through buying a new outfit, through refurbishing a room, through collecting antiques, or through

sipping a martini at day's end. The means are infinite; the styles, unique. Myself, I am a collector of toys. A child of the Great Depression, I had limited playthings in my youth and am hurriedly making up for past time, for those countless walks through Woolworth's coveting what neither I nor my family could afford. A number of Christmases ago, I found that I envied my children what I had bought them. Resenting the fact that their father, a dues-paying member of the Middle Class, was more affluent than my own, I was at war with myself. I have now made peace: each Christmas Eve, my stocking is stuffed with toys, and on that magical next day--and on many a day that follows--, I play to heart's content. I am the envy of fathers in my neighborhood and a source of enchantment to secretaries at the University.

As Ecclesiastes informs us at the commencement of a passage both elegant and eloquent in its language, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die..." Even a speech such as this has its season--its temporal place in the sun; its own cycle of birth, fruition, and death; its rhythmic pattern of beginning, middle, and end. Mine has at last run its course. Now it is time to conference.

Renew. Renew.